

EXPLAINING MUSIC

Essays and Explorations

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CHAPTER I

On the Nature and Limits of Critical Analysis

1.

Experienced naively-without any psychological predispositions or cultural preconceptions whatsoever-the world, as William James observed, is a buzzing, booming confusion of discrete, unrelated sense impressions. It is "full of sound and fury" One may, of course, try to experience existence in this way: unmediated by concepts, classes, or relationships. And a number of artists and writers-for example, John Cage, Norman O. Brown, and Alain Robbe-Grillet-have urged such mindless innocence upon us. So, too, have some members of the hippy-drug subculture. In the Electric KoolAid Acid Test, Tom Wolfe gives us this viewpoint unadulterated:

That baby sees the world with a completeness that you and I will never know again. His doors of perception have not yet been closed. He still experiences the moment he lives in. The inevitable bullshit hasn't constipated his cerebral cortex yet. He still sees the world as it really is, while we sit here, left with only a dim historical version of it manufactured for us by words and official bullshit, and so forth and so on.

But Wolfe's world of scatological romanticism, reminding us of Wordsworth's Ode, cannot be understood. It has neither process nor form, meaning nor value. Like the world of Benji in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, "It is a tale told by an idiot . . . signifying nothing." It merely exists.

To understand the world, we must abstract from the ineffable uniqueness of stimuli by selecting and grouping, classifying and analyzing. We must attend to some features of an object, person, or process rather than others distinguishing (from some particular point of view) the essential from the accidental, the intrinsic from the incidental. The intelligible present is not an isolated instant in time, but, as Whitehead put it: "What we perceive as the present is the vivid fringe of memory tinged with anticipation." A meaningful, a humanly viable world must be ordered and patterned into relationships of some sort. This is the case not only in everyday existence, but in the arts and sciences as well.

The order thus discerned-whether in nature, culture, or art-is not, however, arbitrary or fictitious. The processes and forms, patterns and principles discovered by scientists, social scientists, and humanists are derived, directly or indirectly, from existent events that are really there in the world. They are not arbitrary figments of subjective imagination. The similarities between events, the orderliness of processes, and the hierarchic structuring of relationships are just as real as the differences between events, the features which are disordered, and the absence of relationship. The critic does not, like God, bring order out of chaos. Rather, like the scientist, though with important differences, the critic seeks to reveal and explain an order already present in some work of art-an order perhaps not previously observed, or observed only partially or inaccurately.

Because it abstracts, classifies, and conceptualizes, criticism is often disparaged on the ground that it distorts the complex richness of the individual aesthetic experience-its special savor and indescribable affective quality. In a strict sense, this charge cannot, I think, be refuted. A specific musical experience which combines the perception of musical events with the subjective peculiarities of an individual human psyche at a specific moment in its history, is unique. Criticism cannot fully know or explain that experience. Nor is it concerned to do so. For criticism endeavors to understand and explain the relationships among and between musical events, not the responses of individual listeners. Those we must leave to the shamans of the middle-class-the psychoanalysts.

However, though the individual's particular experience is unique and perhaps unknowable, the perceptions which shape that experience are not so. Whenever it goes beyond the mere sensing of incoming stimuli, listening is necessarily analytical-abstracting, classifying, and organizing musical stimuli into patterns, processes, and relationships. As soon as one perceives the tone of, say, an oboe, is aware of octave identity, or groups tones into motives and motives into phrases,

one has abstracted-has ignored a myriad of attributes present in the series of stimuli. Awareness virtually compels conceptualization. Our perception of the splendor of a sunset or of the subtle nuances of a lovely theme are inseparable from our knowledge of the event as being a sunset or a theme.

In his novel, *End of the Road*, John Barth has put this much better than I can. His hero, Jacob Horner, a writer, exclaims: "Articulation! There, by Joe, was my absolute, if I could be said to have one To turn experience into speech-that is, to classify, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it-is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt- with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man alive and kicking." And just as the artist in presenting a reality in words, visual materials, or musical tones in this sense distorts his and our experience of existence, so criticism in its turn necessarily falsifies the experience of the art work. But only so betrayed, to paraphrase Barth, can works of art be understood or discussed at all. Only a totally mystical experience is entirely nonanalytic, and it cannot be conceptualized or even adequately described-since the act of description is itself a distortion. Those who seek to savor the singularity of their own psyches must, therefore, abandon all hope of rational discourse or intelligible communication. The only valid response to unmediated experience is silence. As Tom Lehrer has said: "If you can't communicate, the least you can do is shut up!"

Conceptual analysis, then, is not just something done by stuffy, arid academics. It takes place whenever anyone attends intelligently to the world. It is the only way in which we can cope with the buzzing, booming confusion which everywhere surrounds us. On the other hand, particularly in an academic context such as this, it is well to remember that we tend to teach and study those aspects of experience that most easily lend themselves to abstraction and syntactification. There are, however, other, more elusive forces shaping any rich human experience. For instance, pace and timing (how long a particular sort of event should continue, and how different sorts of events should follow one another) are, I think, of central importance in both music and literature. But I know of no adequate study of these aspects of temporal experience. Thus, even though we reject Macbeth's picture of the world, we should take Hamlet's caution seriously: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

It is also often objected that criticism or analysis is coldly intellectual and inhumanly detached, fragmenting what is really one and conceptualizing what should be felt. With regard to the first, one can only answer that good criticism separates where separation is warranted by the musical structure and unites wherever the musical organization permits. Because music is hierarchic-tones combining to form motives, motives phrases, and so on - what is separated on one level becomes unified on the next. Only in the music of transcendentalism-the music of Cage, Earl Brown, Pousseur, etc.-is there complete homogeneity and nondifferentiation. And such music cannot be analyzed, only described.

With regard to the assertion that criticism conceptualizes what should be felt and is, therefore, somehow inhuman, two observations seem pertinent. First, the charge rests upon a doubtful dichotomy: namely, that which separates mind and body, and intellect from affect. Our emotional responses to the world are invariably linked to cognitive patternings. Conceptualization precedes and qualifies affective experience. Turning to William James again: he reminds us that a grizzly bear securely confined behind bars elicits one response-perhaps one of amused empathy; the same bear escaped and running toward us, quite another-anxious antipathy. And the difference lies in our conceptual understanding of the situation. Second, there are reasonable grounds for believing that the musical processes and structures explicitly conceptualized in criticism are those which evoke affective responses in sensitive and experienced listeners.

To conclude the first part of this chapter, I dispute vehemently the notion that an intellectual response to works of art, and to the world in general, is inhuman or undesirable. Quite the opposite. The arts, philosophy, and history, as well as the sciences and social sciences, are valuable and relevant because they are entertaining. Not in the sense of the Ed Sullivan show -it diverts. But in the sense that T. S. Eliot had in mind when he said that poetry is superior amusement. For to entertain ideas-to see pattern and structure in the world-and to be entertained by ideas is both the most human and the most humane condition to which man can aspire.

2.

Criticism (or critical analysis) must be distinguished from style analysis.

For these disciplines, though complementary, involve different viewpoints, methods, and goals. Critical analysis seeks to understand and explain what is idiosyncratic about a particular composition: how is this piece different from all other pieces, even those in the same style and of the same genre? It is concerned with the implications of this specific motive or process, the function and structure of this specific harmonic progression, the relationship between this particular slow introduction and the Allegro which follows it, the reason why there is a *sforzando* on this note or why this theme is interrupted at this particular point. In short, criticism tries to discover the secret of the singular-to explain in what ways

the patterns and processes peculiar to a particular work are related to one another and to the hierarchic structure of which they form a part.

Style analysis, on the other hand, is normative. It is concerned with discovering and describing those attributes of a composition which are common to a group of works-usually ones which are similar in style, form, or genre. It asks, for instance, about the characteristic features of late Baroque music -its typical textures, harmonic procedures, and formal organization; or it inquires into the features common to diverse movements in sonata form or different types of operas. Style analysis, in its pure form, ignores the idiosyncratic in favor of generalization and typology. Consequently statistical methods are as a rule more appropriate in style analysis than in criticism. For style analysis, a particular composition is an instance of a technique, a form, or a genre.

In describing and classifying typical processes and schemata, style analysis discloses and defines those probabilities-those rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, and textural relationships-which are characteristic of the music of a particular period, a form, or a genre. Here style analysis shades into what is commonly called music theory. For harmony and counterpoint, too, are normative and probabilistic. To take an obvious example, a progression from the dominant to the tonic is normative and probable in the harmonic practice of the eighteenth century, as is indicated by the fact that it is called an authentic cadence. A motion from the dominant to the submediant is less probable, and is said to be deceptive. Indeed, what has traditionally been called music theory is by and large the translation of the normative practice of some style period into a set of syntactical rules for writing exercises in that style.

But a significant distinction must, I believe, be made between the essentially inductive norms of style analysis and an authentic theory of music." Briefly, a real theory of music endeavors, where possible, to discover the principles governing the formation of the typical procedures and schemata described in style analysis. Let me give a simple example of what I have in mind. In books on counterpoint there is generally a rule which states that after a skip, a melody should normally move by step in the opposite direction. This rule is a generalization from sixteenth-century practice. It describes a practice, but it does not explain why the practice makes sense or why it was developed in the first place. Suppose a student were to ask: "Why does this melody of Palestrina descend in stepwise fashion after an upward skip of a sixth?" We might answer: "Well, that was the rule," or "That's what composers writing at the time usually did." But this is clearly circular reasoning, since Palestrina's music was part of the data used in deriving the rule. So the student-probably he is an undergraduate-presses us further, asking:

"Why did Palestrina follow this practice?" Here we would have to answer him with a general law of some sort. We might, for instance, cite the Gestalt law of completeness, which asserts that the human mind, searching for stable shapes, wants patterns to be as complete as possible. A skip is a kind of incompleteness: the listener is aware of the gap between the first pitch and the second, and "wants" the gap to be filled in, which stepwise motion in the opposite direction does. This "law" of melody is presumably not style-bound, but applies to the music of Beethoven or that of south India, as well as the music of the sixteenth century-though what represents a satisfactory filling of a gap will depend upon the repertory of tones prevalent in the modes of a style.

One might, of course, attempt to generalize still further, asking why mind searches for stable shapes. And one might explain that because human behavior is not for the most part genetically determined, men must envisage the consequences choices in order to know how to act in the present; and they can envisage and choose only in terms of patterns and processes which are regular and relatively complete. But I doubt that the explanation of musical practice needs to be pushed back this far. As a rule we are, I think, satisfied with the least inclusive law which will account for the events described. To put the matter in another way: we endeavor to go beyond descriptive or statistical norms to the simplest explanation which takes the form of a general principle. The goal of music theory is to discover such principles.

It is not, however, the goal of critical analysis to do so. Critical analysis uses the laws formulated by music theory-and, as we shall see, the normative categories of style analysis-in order to explain how and why the particular events within a specific composition are related to one another. Theory gives us the general principles governing, say, the processes of melodic implication and closure, while criticism is concerned with the ways in which those principles are actualized-or perhaps evaded-in the case of a specific motive, theme, or section in a particular work.

A description, no matter how detailed and elaborate, is not an explanation. A catalogue of successive pitches (e.g., observing that "the melody begins on D, skips up to Bb, and then moves down to A which is trilled ..."), the labeling of chords (as C major, F major, etc.), or a listing of dominant instrumental timbres-none of these constitute a critical analysis of a composition.

I do not intend to suggest that descriptive discourse is not relevant-even necessary-in critical analysis. To be so, however, it must be used in conjunction with a viable theory about how the various parameters of music -melody, rhythm, timbre, harmony, and the like-function; that is, how they give rise to patterns and relationships. For instance, given an hypothesis about the psychological functioning of structural melodic gaps, it is meaningful to observe that "the melody begins on D, skips up to Bb ... " and so on. Similarly given an hypothesis about the role and function of ornaments in melodic-rhythmic processes, it becomes significant to describe a note as bearing a trill-usually giving some reason why it does so. But in the absence of a background of theory which relates events to one another, description, even when disguised in a cloak of obscure technical jargon, explains nothing.

In music, psychological constants such as the principles of pattern organization, the syntax of particular styles, and typical schemata such as triadic holons constitute the rules of the game. Their actualization as specific musical events is the realization of what Koestler calls flexible strategy. For any given musical repertory the "rules" determine the kinds of patterns that can be employed in a composition. They are the province of style criticism. Strategies, which are variable and nonrecurring, give rise to particular instances of some general type or class. The task of critical analysis is to explain why a general rule was actualized in the way it was. For instance, in the example from Mozart's Symphony No. 39, the rules of the game tell us that the theme belongs to the characteristic pattern called "antecedent consequent phrase." The strategy to be explained is the particular realization of this normative pattern. Because rules do not determine strategies, commonsense reasons are necessary to explain specific musical events. They bridge the gap between rule and strategy. And because common-sense reasons are necessarily ad hoc, criticism is, and will always be, an art-not a science.

The reasons used to explain a particular musical event will, then, be of two different sorts: rule reasons, derived from style analysis and music theory, which will tend to be constant, and strategy reasons which will be of the ad hoc, common-sense variety. Because they depend upon particular circumstances, strategy reasons are generally, eclectic. Sometimes they will be drawn from established disciplines such as acoustics or psychology; at other times they will be based upon common sense. Rule reasons, too, at least for the present, will from time to time be eclectic. This, because music theory is still rudimentary and style analysis only somewhat less so.

Not only will criticism tend to be eclectic, but some aspects of music may for a time simply be inexplicable. Fortunately, however, explanation need not be exhaustive and absolutely certain in order to be illuminating. Were complete information and incontrovertible theory a prerequisite for understanding, science, for example, would never have even begun.

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Even though critical analyses are seldom comprehensive, all too often they will seem unduly arduous and protracted. This is because there is invariably a disparity between the speed and ease with which music is experienced and understood, and the length and complexity of the discussion needed to explain why and how it is experienced and understood. A simple melody of, say, sixteen measures, which takes less than a minute to perform, may require several pages-five or six minutes worth-of explanation. Many students and discerning listeners find this disparity incongruous and disconcerting. And the critic frequently feels the same way. But this "Disparity Effect" is by no means confined to criticism; it holds true for every explanation in every discipline: in the sciences and social sciences, as well as in the humanities. A solar eclipse may last little more than an hour; a student disturbance less than a day. But explaining these events may require extended and intricate discussion.

Take riding a bicycle, for instance. Why a bicycle is relatively stable and hence rideable has been considered by a number of scientists-most recently by David E. H. Jones. Jones begins his discussion as follows: "Almost everyone can ride a bicycle, yet apparently no one knows how they do it. I believe that the trick contains much unrecognized subtlety . . ." 5 Why a bicycle is stable proves to be a subtle problem involving questions of gravity, geometry, centrifugal force, gyroscopic action, and so on. But Jones's seven-page article, detailed and complex though it is, is an account only of the theory of bike-riding-of the rule reasons for stability.

Suppose, however, that the series of events in an actual bicycle ride was to be explained. Taking into consideration not only Jones's theory of stability, but specific features of the terrain (hills, curves, road surface, etc.) and information about the rider (his weight, muscular strength, experience, and so on), analysis would seek to explain precisely what happened on

the ride: how and why the rider shifted his weight, turned the wheel, changed gears, and modified his speed in order to follow the specific course taken. It is this sort of particular musical event-series which the critic attempts to explain. Considering that even a simple melody is at least as complex an event as a short bike ride, it is scarcely surprising that explanations in criticism are usually longer and more involved than one might wish.

Jones's statement calls attention to another important consideration. Just as one can ride a bicycle without knowing how a bicycle really works, so experienced listeners can respond sensitively to music without knowing anything about what makes music work: without knowing about the theory or history of music. Because it involves attending to and comprehending tonal relationships, understanding music is, I have argued, necessarily cognitive and analytical. But it does not follow from this that understanding depends upon knowledge of theory or information about means and techniques. We can perceive and comprehend actions and relationships-musical as well as nonmusical-without the explicit conceptualization necessary for explanation.

Zealous listeners are sometimes heard to protest that they "love" music, but don't understand it. This is, of course, absurd. People seldom like what they do not understand. Quite the opposite. Because it threatens a deep need for psychic security, men generally detest and reject what seems incomprehensible. Witness the hostility which contemporary music so often excites in audiences accustomed to the syntax and structure of tonal music.

What listeners mean when they say that they don't understand music is that they can't read it, name syntactic processes, classify formal procedures, or otherwise explain how music works. Like many theatergoers in ancient Greece or Elizabethan England, they are illiterate, but they are by no means ignorant. Luckily, understanding does not depend upon literacy or upon theoretical knowledge. If it did, the audiences for the plays of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, or for the music of Bach and Brahms, would have been very small indeed.

Understanding and enjoying a Bach fugue or a Brahms sonata does not involve knowing about-conceptualizing-cadences, contrapuntal devices, bridge passages, and the like, any more than being entertained by Hamlet involves knowing about syntactic functions, prosodic devices, or dramatic means. Understanding music, to paraphrase what Bertrand Russell has said of language, is not a matter of knowing the technical terms of music theory, but of habits correctly acquired in oneself and rightly presumed in others. Listening to music intelligently is more like knowing how to ride a bicycle than knowing why a bicycle is rideable.

This is not to contend that education cannot enhance understanding and increase appreciation and enjoyment. By calling attention to patterns and relationships which might otherwise have been missed, it refines the aural imagination and increases the sensitivity of the cognitive ear. And to this enterprise, critical analysis can certainly make an important contribution. But education is not its primary goal. The primary goal of criticism is explanation for its own sake. Because music fascinates, excites, and moves us, we want to explain, if only imperfectly, in what ways the events within a particular composition are related to one another and how such relationships shape musical experience. Though knowledge about the theory and history of music are not a prerequisite for sensitive understanding, they are a necessary basis for explanation.

Criticism depends not only upon knowledge, nonmusical as well as musical, but upon such elusive qualities as general intelligence-the ability to perceive the propriety of some reasons and the irrelevance of others-and, most important of all, musical experience and sensitivity. For the critic begins by sensing or guessing how a musical event "works"-how it fits together and functions. Michael Polanyi's observation that "the study of an organ must begin with an attempt to guess what it is for and how it works" applies to the study of a musical composition as well. Once a work or passage is understood in this almost intuitive way, the critic will begin to analyze its structure. He will attempt to discover what kind of patterning underlies it, and hence which rule reasons are appropriate for its analysis; what sorts of implications are suggested by its melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic organization, and whether and how these are actualized; how the event is structured hierarchically, and in what ways the several levels of the hierarchy are related to one another.

The answers to questions such as these are not always obvious at first. Repeated playing and listening may be required. Because the several parameters do not necessarily move in congruent fashion (with the result that harmony, melody, rhythm, and so on may each yield a different pattern of organization), it will at times be helpful to analyze the parameters separately, order to study their interrelationships. Often it is illuminating to "normalize" a passage-rewrite it in a simpler, archetypal form-in order to understand how the composer has modified a traditional schema. Always it is important to discover which tones or harmonies are structurally essential and which are ornamental. When employing such techniques-which are personal knowledge not modes of explanation, but methods for disclosing how a musical event functions-the critic's "ear," his musicality, must guide analysis. It must accept or reject a linear abstraction, an harmonic

reduction, or a rhythmic analysis. His ear keeps the critic honest. Without its control, theory or style analysis tends to become a Procrustean bed to which the practice of composers is made to conform.

Because its reasons are often ad hoc and its explanations eclectic, criticism may at times seem somewhat improvisatory. But this does not mean that it is arbitrary or illogical. Different sorts of arguments from a variety of sources may be employed, but they must be applied objectively: rules and techniques, arguments and evidence must be used in the same way in each analysis; and, though not systematized, reasons must be consistent with one another. Criticism must obviously be musically persuasive, but this is not enough. For what finally convinces is aural cogency combined with logical coherence.

Because it must be scrupulous in reasoning, but flexible in strategy, criticism might well be called the delicate discipline.